

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 874

EA 023 399

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TITLE Conversations on School Restructuring in the
Mid-Atlantic Region.
INSTITUTION Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia,
Pa.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 5 Sep 91
CONTRACT RP-91-002-004
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.)
(120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *School Based
Management; School District Autonomy; School
Effectiveness; *School Organization; *School
Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS *United States (Mid Atlantic States)

ABSTRACT

Focus groups are planned each year to gather regional needs assessment information on school restructuring as part of the Research for Better Schools (RBS) planning process. In spring 1991, RBS staff gathered rich, contextual data from five focus group discussions held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Newark, New Jersey; the District of Columbia; Denton, Maryland; and State College, Pennsylvania. The methodology section provides information on the selection of participants (N=27), development of stimuli, conduct of focus group sessions, and procedure of focus group discussions. Three major themes were addressed, starting with student outcomes. Issues included the points that children can learn, they need to learn to work cooperatively, they need to learn to learn, and they need to develop a sense of self-worth. The second theme concerned the changes needed to achieve identified student outcomes. Developing a vision, expanding the curriculum, grouping students and teachers, modifying school calendars and day, and changing the roles of educators and school personnel are among the issues discussed. The final theme involved the types of assistance needed to help achieve student outcomes. This included promoting communications among educators about schooling, providing technical assistance, and conducting research and assistance in grant writing. Conclusions and implications are discussed. (RR)

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ED337874

Conversations on
School Restructuring in the Mid-Atlantic Region

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September 5, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Focus groups are planned each year to gather regional needs assessment information on school restructuring as part of Research for Better Schools (RBS) planning process. These groups provide the laboratory with the opportunity to eavesdrop as educators and others concerned with the conditions of education discuss the critical school restructuring issues facing elementary and secondary education. As a result of these group sessions, RBS staff are able to gather rich, contextual data that helps them plan and direct laboratory resources to meet the emerging school restructuring needs of the Mid-Atlantic region.

This document reports on the first round of focus groups held this past spring. The report is organized into three additional sections. The next section briefly reviews the methodology used in scheduling, conducting, and analyzing the five focus group discussions. These discussions are summarized in the results section. The final section of the report presents the major conclusions that can be drawn from this first round of focus groups and their implications for RBS in planning future work.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct the five FY 91 focus groups, RBS relied essentially on the same methodology followed in previous years and documented elsewhere (Buttram, 1990). Focus group procedures involved the selection of individuals throughout the region to participate in the laboratory's groups, the development of stimuli to prompt the groups' discussions, the conduct of the five sessions, and the analysis of the resulting five discussions.

Selection of Participants

Early in the spring of FY 91, RBS staff members were asked to nominate individuals to attend focus groups. Several criteria were given to help staff identify potential candidates:

- articulate and opinionated about the current conditions of schooling and the need for major reform
- currently serving in the role of a teacher, building or district administrator, state education staff member, higher education faculty, member of professional educational association, legislator or staff representative, parent, business person, or child advocacy agency staff member
- geographical proximity to one of the five focus group locations.

Over 150 names were generated by RBS staff members for approximately 35 slots. Because of scheduling conflicts, over 70 individuals were invited and eventually 27 accepted RBS' invitation and attended a focus group session.

These individuals often fulfilled multiple responsibilities in their current positions (e.g., three of the four classroom teachers also served in leadership roles in their professional associations). Many had prior professional experiences in other settings (e.g., one principal had recently been employed at the state education agency). The range of participants' current, primary professional positions are summarized below:

<u>Role</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Classroom teachers	4	14.8
Principals	2	7.4
Central/district office staff	7	26.0
Superintendents	4	14.8
State education representatives	2	7.4
Intermediate unit/consortium representatives	3	11.1
Higher education representatives	2	7.4
Advocacy organization representative	2	7.4
Professional association	1	3.7

This group clearly brought a rich experiential base to the discussions.

Development of Stimuli

All five focus group discussions addressed school restructuring issues, one of RBS' three programmatic emphases during the next five years (FY 91-95). Since schools should undertake restructuring only when trying to achieve a different order of results for students (Corbett, 1990), the focus group discussion first tackled the issue of student outcomes. The first stimulus was thus posed as "What student outcomes should schools be responsible for?" Participants in the first two focus groups found responding to this stimulus difficult and so an alternative stimulus was tried with the remaining three groups. The revised stimulus was, "What student outcomes are schools currently meeting and what student outcomes are schools not meeting?" Although participants seemed more comfortable with the revised stimulus prompt, their responses were not appreciably more specific.

The second stimulus asked participants in all five groups, "What changes will have to occur in schools to achieve the outcomes discussed earlier?" This stimulus was more successful in stimulating participant response. In fact, participants often anticipated this question in responding to the earlier question addressing student outcomes.

The third stimulus was first used in RBS' FY 89 round of focus groups and was repeated in this most recent round. The stimulus asked participants, "What assistance can organizations like RBS provide to schools to help them achieve these outcomes?" Although participants typically do not identify much beyond technical assistance and dissemination, it's an important question to round out the session.

Conduct of Focus Group Sessions

Focus group sessions were conducted in five locations across the region: Pittsburgh, PA; Newark, NJ; Washington, DC; Denton, MD; and State

College, PA. The first three groups examined restructuring needs across the Mid-Atlantic region; the latter two discussed restructuring needs from a rural schools perspective.

Each focus group met in a small conference room in one of the participant's organization or agency. Participants were seated in comfortable chairs around a conference table. Cold drinks or other beverages were usually available. The focus group session started with the moderator (i.e., the RBS needs assessment director) asking participants to introduce themselves. A written participant list was provided to help them recall each other's name and position. Once introductions were completed, the moderator and another RBS staff member explained the purpose of the focus group, procedural guidelines, and started the group's discussion of the first stimulus. After approximately 45 minutes, a second, and then a third stimulus was presented until the group worked its way through all three. The sessions typically lasted about two hours once introductions were completed. Except for clarification questions, the moderator and the other RBS staff member did not participate in the groups' discussions. The sessions were taped to assist the moderator in later analysis and summary of the sessions.

Analysis of Focus Group Discussions

As the first step in analysis, transcripts were made of the five focus group sessions. The transcripts generally were 25-30 pages long. To analyze the data, the moderator read each transcript several times. The first reading helped to refresh her memory of the groups' discussions. During the next several readings, text passages describing a student outcome (stimulus 1) were highlighted. Once the text had been marked for outcomes, several additional readings were completed to highlight text passages identifying the changes needed in schools (stimulus 2). This process was repeated a third time to identify the types of assistance needed (stimulus 3).

Protocols were then developed to code each set of highlighted text. This involved reading each passage and assigning a short descriptor to it (e.g., all students can learn and be successful in school). Separate descriptors were developed for the three sets of passages. Descriptors were reused from one transcript to another, whenever possible, to identify common themes in participants' comments within and across the five focus groups.

Once all the highlighted passages were coded, the descriptors were clustered to develop themes or issues that reflected the groups' discussions for the three stimuli. These themes or issues, along with transcript sections to further illustrate or clarify these themes, thus serve as a narrative, qualitative summary of the results. Although RBS originally intended to report the themes of the three regionally-oriented and the two rurally-oriented focus groups separately, no significant differences existed and so the results for all five are reported together.

RESULTS

This section of the report summarizes the discussions of the five focus groups to the three stimuli: student outcomes for which schools should be responsible, changes needed in schooling to accomplish these outcomes, and assistance needed by schools to achieve these outcomes. The major themes or issues of their discussions are presented below. Participant quotations are provided to further explain these themes.

Student Outcomes

The issue of student outcomes was addressed first in the five focus groups. As one participant noted,

That's why in all this talk about school restructuring, all of that is all well and good, but if it's not tied to an end, having to do with student learning, then I say what for?

In spite of this sentiment, participants found it difficult to respond in much specificity when the first question was posed, "What student outcomes should schools be responsible for?" As noted above, a second, somewhat different stimulus (i.e., What student outcomes are schools currently meeting and what student outcomes are schools not meeting?) to encourage participants' discussion met with no more appreciable success.

All Children Can Learn

The basic premise, that schools should provide opportunities for all students to learn and succeed, and the reality that schools did not always function with this premise in mind, was present in all five focus groups. As two participants noted,

Every child should be given more of a chance to succeed.

I think you begin to look at the fundamental belief...that all children can learn and I have to say that I don't think that the large percentage of people you encounter in schools believe all children can learn. I think they believe some children learn and they structure the learning situation so that some children can learn and I think it's sad.

The majority of participants felt that schools provide an acceptable, though often not challenging education for "students that come to school with all the tickets," (e.g., home environment conducive to learning, motivated to achieve).

I think we hit on some kids.

I think a lot of our programs are meeting basic needs of students. I know earlier you mentioned about higher thinking. I think we're looking at that, but I don't think we have successfully met them. But basic, rote, memory kinds of teaching we've been successful. Like math computation.

...students who are achieving at the 85th percentile. Well, those are the kids who probably should be achieving in the 98th percentile if you measure them that way. So I don't think we're making that much of a difference for those kids. I guess I don't see schools at the present time as challenging in a learning capacity as a way we should be doing it.

Participants in one focus group pointed out the benefits of strong advocates in receiving a quality education in public schools, but tempered that view with the acknowledgement that some students simply do not have the advocates they need.

My point was that there are the students whose needs we do not meet, a large population of students, who do not have advocates and therefore I don't know if they get enough attention.

What you're really saying...is that when kids have advocates and strong lobby groups, then things happen in schools, but for many kids who have nothing, nothing happens. So that schools really don't do it on their own through an inner energy that says this is the right thing to do. The schools respond to the pressure.

These sentiments were repeated in other focus groups as well. Without these advocates, the majority felt that many students do not receive their "fair share of the pie." This was especially the case for impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged students.

As noted earlier, focus group participants were unable to identify specific student outcomes. Their responses, instead, focused on five broad areas in which schools should concentrate their work with students. These included learning to work cooperatively, learning to learn and become lifelong learners, developing higher order thinking skills, developing a sense of self-worth, and preparing to enter adulthood. In addition, participants felt that schools should make sure that other non-academic needs of students are met (e.g., health, nutrition) and so they called for the integration of education and social services for children. These six areas of student outcomes are further described below.

Work Cooperatively

Schools need to help students learn how to work as part of a group, to work cooperatively. Participants stressed,

We have to be able to work in groups and work with other people and think and cooperate, there's a need for more cooperative learning.

Students need to be able to work well with one another. The day of the rugged individualist is long past. Businesses are looking for people who can work together to solve problems.

As illustrated in these two comments, the need to work cooperatively is rooted in participants' sense of the workplace of both today and the future, and the need for schools to prepare students to enter the world of work.

Learn to Learn

The next two areas identified by participants are interrelated. Schools need to teach students how to learn and become lifelong learners. With the rapid changes in technology and the forecasts that workers will make multiple career changes in their lives, schools need to help students learn how to adapt to changing demands.

...one point of view that you can make a good argument, I think, for, that being the future of education, life-long learning, less facts, less of some of Diane Ravitch's that every 17 year old should know and more, how do you learn to learn. How do you...begin to generate information on your own, to begin to make yourself a lifelong learner in whatever you choose to do.

Unless students are motivated to continue learning, and become independent learners, participants felt that students' success after graduation from high school will be compromised.

Higher Order Skills

In keeping with the growing national concern on American students' higher order thinking skills, participants in our five focus groups noted the need for schools to teach students to think critically and solve problems.

In terms of higher order thinking skills. In other words, to look at problems and be able to solve them, communicate about them, manipulate them in new and different ways so that they can come up with something. Not just a regurgitation of what the teacher gives you which is I think the standard that you now get.

Curriculum that stresses "drill and kill" was seen as "turning students off" and jeopardizing their academic preparation.

Sense of Self-Worth

Focus group participants felt that it was important for schools to help students develop a sense of self-worth, of self-confidence and esteem, especially in terms of their ability to learn and succeed.

It means opportunity for students to walk away from a situation feeling a sense of self-worth, also mutual worth.

...what schools are not doing well is helping children feel good about education, about being in school. I think that children need to feel good about what they're doing with their lessons...And how teachers, and guidance counselors and the

school principal is treating them and dealing with them, and their parents.

Participants stressed that students who feel good about themselves will feel confident to tackle challenging instruction and succeed.

Transition to School to Work

Finally, schools should be responsible for preparing students to leave school and enter the adult world, and to be "good citizens" and "good workers." In order to facilitate this transition, the student's studies at school should stress relevance and applications to the real world.

...to have learning that has some relevance in the world that they're going to face in the future. That's the link between what they're learning in school and the resources from which they learn in schools, and that doesn't match with what they're going to face in the real world.

...the kinds of things I hear is that they need their workers to be problem solvers. They need them to have a work ethic. They need them to have tenacity at tasks they are doing and they need them to have some picture, big picture, of where their work fits in with what they're about. And they need them to be able to learn so that they can pick it up and do OJT right there and move forward. So it seems to me that since we are going to have more and more people who need to get out there in the work force and deal not with their hands all the time, but in working with their minds, we ought to take another look at how kids are spending time...because I think those customers who get the students immediately from high school are the ones feeling short-changed.

Participants felt that schooling must have a sense of purpose, of direction. Schools must prepare students for their adult responsibilities.

Non-Academic Needs of Students

In addition to these five educational outcomes, participants felt that schools, as the one unifying center of children's lives, had other responsibilities to meet in terms of the students they serve. In order for children to learn, their medical, health, and emotional well-being had to be ensured. As one participant poignantly noted, "today we ask schools to do what we used to ask God to do." In all five discussions, participants talked about the need to involve and interface with other groups that serve children (e.g., health, social services). As four participants noted,

And I think when we talk about, okay, we're responsible for academic preparation of students, but then there's all these other things that everybody here has said students need in addition to that. Who should be providing that? Should the schools be providing that? Is that our responsibility? But the students need it anyway. If we don't provide it, who will? I think there's so much confusion in that whole area.

It has to happen. I have a lot of people on my faculty that just resent it terribly, but it has to happen. And this is what I preach to them. Those services aren't available to them. They're not being serviced. They're not getting the proper medical attention, the proper nutrition, the proper help that they need and the school is the only place that can do it. Where else can it be done?

I don't see the provision of let's say, social service kinds of things at the school level, necessarily as a negative thing. I see it as if the school needs to turn itself on its head to make it work for kids, then that's what we should do.

...have school personnel who serve as links between parents, children, and community services who can sort of steer the parent in the right direction and make the referral, cut through the red tape, but at the same time, that personnel, that person can't have other kinds of responsibilities that are overwhelming.

These quotations demonstrate the dilemmas facing educators as they struggle to meet all of the needs of their students.

Changes Needed in Schools

In order for these student outcomes to be achieved, focus group participants stressed that major changes in American education were necessary. As one participant noted,

I think the most significant thing...for me, is the not tinkering. It's not adding on and taking away. We are talking about a fundamental change in...the infrastructure of the school.

Participants identified three types of changes necessary in schools. The first set concerned the process for developing a shared vision of where schools are going and an understanding of the change process (i.e., how difficult the journey will be to get there), the second with specific changes needed in educational programs, and the third concerned the changing roles that teachers, principals, students, parents, and the community will have to play. Each of these is described in more detail below.

Development of a Vision

Focus group participants felt strongly that everyone involved in school restructuring initiatives must share a vision of the school they are trying to create and a sense of urgency to accomplish its creation. This change thus calls for school personnel to work together to develop a shared vision. The emphasis here is on the process of developing the shared vision, not what the vision should be (i.e., student outcomes that schools should be responsible for).

...one of the first things we do, and it sounds so trite and so simple, but is to get them to agree on those common beliefs that become part of the mission and vision and the goals and the action plan and so forth, and so that's a very significant statement in terms of beliefs as part of restructuring...I don't think you can restructure and get to it until that entire group of people...have that common understanding.

...the whole system...it has to be everybody. That's one of the hardest things. That's one of the hardest obstacles when you introduce change, is getting everybody focused.

I think that one of the biggest problems in school restructuring is creating among the staff of the school a sense of urgency. I think there are some people in every school who are risk takers and who are willing to attempt to try, and to try really sometimes in the face of incredible obstacles, that should dictate that they won't succeed. There is also in every school, people who do not share a sense of urgency about the need to change, the need to do things differently, the need to change the interaction...I think that's probably, for me...one of the hardest issues to confront because people, when you talk about change, we all know it's a long process and it takes a long time, and there are those who would say we don't have that time.

Not only do educators need to know what they want their school to become, they must have a sophisticated understanding of how complex and complicated the change process is. Restructuring efforts challenge the very core of most school people's professional lives. They require a great amount of time and patience and an action plan to guide their work.

I don't think you can change schools and be non-threatening.

It wasn't clear to me how the individual school buildings were going to get where they were supposed to go in terms of goals. The goals were articulated, but now what is actually going to happen at the building level to get it there.

We've had so many powerful lessons about change and successful organizational change, but we never are given a chance to pull all that together, use it. The way I sort of look at it is we made all the mistakes we really need to make in the 60s and 70s and 80s because there was a lot of experimentation going on and so forth. Now is the time to use some of this stuff as we pull it together and use what we know.

I think we need to have realistic ideas about how long it takes for changes to work...Change takes time.

But I think at this point when we're ready to shift, it seems like some school systems start the shifting process but they don't plan time to work on their reform. The school improvement movement around the country, it's really eating up

teachers time to serve on committees and collaborating...so we are not figuring out how we're going to make time for reforms so that people on a regular basis can reflect and plan with each other so they begin to develop enough trust to try some new stuff and take some new risks together.

We move at a glacial pace. We tend to stop as soon as there's a road block. If there's a union problem that gets in the way, okay, everybody back off. Instead of trying to figure out how to work through the problems, to move to the next step, we tend to stop.

Educational Program

The next set of changes proposed by focus group participants addressed specific changes necessary in the educational programs of schools.

If you ask me how to start schools completely over, I'd get rid of all the desks and have the kindergarten program up to grade 8. There would be investigation. Kids thinking. Not cut into blocks of time. Anyone in the right world would never establish a school for six year old kids, put them in a desk, five days a week, stand somebody in front of them who will talk at them, 75 percent of the time and expect them to learn. I mean it's absolutely ridiculous.

Most of the proposals suggested by the focus group participants were not as radical as the one suggested above. Their changes fell into seven inter-related sets, including meeting individual student needs and expectations, recognizing how student learning occurs, extending the learning environment to outside the classroom, expanding the depth and breadth of the school curriculum, changing how teachers and students are grouped for instruction, altering the school calendar and day, and revising student assessment and evaluation.

Individual needs and expectations. Although most educators readily acknowledge that students learn in different ways and at different speeds, school programs are seldom responsive to those differences. Almost all students receive "assembly-line instruction." Focus group participants asserted that schools must break out of this "factory" mentality and deal with students on an individual basis.

You've got to disaggregate the class and begin to look at ways in which you can meet their needs.

...you've got to break it down for the individual because there's no one curriculum that works with everyone. The best learning program in the world is to make sure that everybody is more different, not more alike.

...students would be treated on an individual basis, that would take into account difference in learning styles. The child could move fluidly in and out of groups depending on

subject area and the movement that they were making in that subject area.

...to provide kids with different alternatives to learning how to read. One of the things we've done in our school is that we don't subscribe to any one methodology, but we have some classes which are pure whole language...some that use a basal approach...some that use a mixture of both. Because our belief is that different children will learn differently, and therefore you try to match the child to the program, and not the program to the child.

...that we have to find ways to structure our schools so that teachers can be more personally involved with kids.

The underlying programmatic change called for in these comments is to individualize and personalize education, to tailor instruction to meet individual student needs.

Recognize how learning occurs. Advances in cognitive psychology suggest that learning occurs when students are actively engaged, when instruction takes place in some context, when students have opportunities to make connections to the real world. Yet instruction in many classrooms today occurs with few of these essential ingredients. As one participant reported about a colleague's recent visit to urban schools,

...and he came back absolutely astonished at the number of classrooms he entered where the kids were just sitting there, filling out bubbles on answer sheets. These are the kids whose interest in school is not being challenged.

Focus group participants argued that instructional programs require extensive modification to be consistent with what we know about how learning occurs.

...really look at the kinds of things that people in early childhood and the people in math, and their whole concentration on how is it that we teach... really trying in some of the theoretical kinds of things that we know about the way kids learn...and trying to apply that to the actual classrooms.

Restructured classrooms, by design, would be more consistent with current R&D on learning and instruction.

Learning beyond the classroom walls. In keeping with current thinking on how students learn, classroom walls would be "torn down" to allow students to learn in real world settings. As one participant noted,

The idea that students can only learn what is taught inside four walls by one person is absurd.

In restructured schools, students would have the world and its citizens for their classroom and teacher. Students should have "mentors in the

community, involved in the students' learning activities" that connect the school's curriculum to real world problems.

Expanding curriculum depth and breadth. When participants discussed the ills currently facing schools, almost all talked about the irrelevant, boring curriculum students are expected to master. This curriculum is seen as a major stumbling block to school restructuring.

...what we know we have been about in terms of content, as just one example, is not working...There is archaic content.

If students are to become independent, engaged problem solvers, most educators acknowledge that the curriculum must emphasize more relevant, challenging, and process-oriented skills. These changes are reflected in the following comments,

If one computation problem is good, then 30 must be 30 times as great. There is not enough problem solving in the curriculum. We need to narrow the content and increase the process.

Our science leaders at the state department...tell our people that we need to teach two-thirds less content. Going to teach one-third of the content we're now teaching. But that the kids discover hands-on.

Grouping of students and teachers. Many participants talked about the need to revise how students and teachers are grouped. Changes in these groupings would allow for increased responsiveness to individual student needs, interdisciplinary teaching to help students understand the connectedness of what they're learning, and personalize the relationships between and among teachers and students.

First of all we wouldn't have tracking. I think we would have many more groups, mixed groups of children working together to solve problems. The teacher would not be lecturing the way many of them still do. The subject matter would not be isolated the way it usually is in high schools. But there truly would be groups of teachers working with teams of students.

The middle schools, with teaming, have moved in a direction that...is the the most effective thing I've seen as far as teachers working together, planning the program, grouping the kids themselves.

Another thing I would give, and some of our people have talked about it. For example, when a group of kids start school, that teachers may follow them for three or four years. You may have 100 kids with five teachers and they stay with those kids for 4 or 5 years. Talk about accountability. Accountability to have respect and greater understanding.

Modify school calendars and day. Participants frequently commented on the inappropriateness of the current school calendar and day. Although they recognized the historical significance of the agrarian calendar, they repeatedly acknowledged its lack of relevance to today's demands. They argued instead for more freedom to change the school year as well as the individual school day.

We have a 180 day school year which is ridiculous. There needs to be some kind of continuity, potentially for all kids.

I would think about it structurally. We talked about things within a school day. A more flexible schedule, be able to have school that would go from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. or evening or whenever students would be able to take classes when they need to.

...that the structure of time of 45, 50 minutes a day as being the best segment of time in which kids can learn goes against everything that we know and believe about what's really true in the real world.

Several even suggested that school days and school years could vary for individual students, depending on their progress and achievement of expected outcomes.

...about schools and the flexibility of time. I would like to see the school year longer for some students who need it longer. Maybe not as long for others.

We'd worry much less about whether or not the student put 132 clock hours in high school, but if the student met those outcomes, and it was only October, fine. They might go on to something else.

Modify assessment and evaluation. The last set of changes concerned the procedures used to assess student performance. Participants suggested that educators need "to look at what success means in the classroom" and "be very clear about what the expectations are." They also noted that assessment systems are being designed by federal and state policymakers as one lever to force school improvement. However, these assessment systems often do not mirror and often work against the kinds of changes schools are trying to accomplish in student learning.

...obviously if you're going to assess kids in ways that require them to X, Y, and Z, then you'd better be teaching them to do X, Y, and Z all along. So that really becomes the next step. I'm really kind of mirroring here what the state is doing, so we'll try and get the assessment fixed and then hopefully bring them to instruction.

But my concern is that we get ourselves in the trap that we don't necessarily want to get in, and that is we wind up with a strict accountability system that measures specific outcomes

because they're easy to measure. That's part of where we are right now and part of the political mentality that's driving us where we are right now. If we really believe that the process is important, then I think we've got to come up with some means to snapshot progress.

If school restructuring is to succeed, participants argued that there must be greater consistency between instructional goals and student assessment efforts.

Changing Roles

All of these changes will necessitate changes in the ways that students, teachers, principals and other administrators, parents, and other community members interact. Of perhaps most importance were participants' comments on the need for educators, and others, to try on new roles, become risk takers, and break free of practices rooted in "past experiences and traditions."

...we should create an atmosphere in the schools where new things can be tried all the time. That it's all the time a place where new things can be tried with a willingness to risk failure at the same time that you're risking success.

There's a certain cautiousness about us all. We need to be risk takers to some degree.

Responsibility and accountability. Focus group participants talked about the authority of school personnel to make the necessary changes, "to control the switches" and how hard it was to flip those switches.

I think there are a lot of people who really do want to make these changes and yet I don't know that any of us sits on the switch, that would permit policies and procedures to begin to be changed in a dramatic fashion. It just seems to me that people on the switch are not the ones who can make the change.

...when you get to talking about switches, sometimes I think that those of us that have these roles aren't willing to take a risk because of our own professionalism, or what they are going to say on high.

Increased calls for responsibility and accountability work against risk taking in schools. Many focus group participants described the lack of clear expectations, lines of responsibility, and sense of powerlessness present in today's schools. They felt that school policies and procedures were often set by non-educators who mean well, but do not have the necessary expertise to make instructional decisions.

I think we have to, as educators, get a plan, our beliefs. We've got to get our beliefs out front. We don't practice our beliefs.

But the teachers have to have a belief system that says that we can get it done.

In addition, most focus group participants felt that public school educators were not held accountable for student learning.

Because another problem in the belief system is that it is never our fault.

All of us in education need accountability.

One of the problems that I have is that basically teachers are exempt from any real evaluation kind of thing...We, as educators, have not been producing. We have not been turning out the kinds of kids we want to turn out. So what I'm suggesting is that perhaps we have been failing, minus any consequences. There are no consequences.

Until there are explicit consequences for all public school officials, many felt that the incentives for significant improvement were lacking. In order for meaningful change to occur, incentives and consequences must be introduced and applied fairly.

Roles of school personnel. All participants recognized that the roles of school personnel would have to change. In terms of teachers, they felt that:

...one was to certainly make the locus of control closer to where the action is, closer to the teachers, and the school level, and the kids and the parents. To involve them in decision making.

I don't think it is possible to talk about restructuring unless it is teachers that are doing the restructuring because if we do it any other way, it's going to be another top down kind of thing...we have to look at fundamentally changing the ways in which teachers work together because they in fact have to understand and love if you will, these ways of working together. Otherwise, I don't see how they could possibly ever teach children.

We need to organize teachers' work life differently. And it's happened in every place where people do terrific things. They believe in the people that work there and they structure their work so that they have the freedom to come up with a solution.

The role of school administrators, at both the school and district office levels likewise must change.

I do believe that you need whatever you're going to call that position at a building level, you need to have someone who's going to be a filter in a sense and a gofer. You need someone who will be the catalyst to allow the leadership to come out

of the teacher ranks and at times, get a lot of obstacles out of their way and let them function in those roles.

...as far as principals and administrators and teachers and shared decision making goes...I agree that middle management is really the area where that's going to break apart because principals don't want to give up some of that power. I heard it called power sharing more recently.

Changes in the relationships of individual school buildings, district offices, and state departments of education were advocated.

...whereas if the central office supports had been organized as supports, rather than just regulatory and supervisory and dictatorial focuses, I think that would have made a difference ...That central office and state have to be organized to be supports to schools instead of coming down with demands and that schools have to be able to make some choices.

...so many systems now are (dictated) from the central office standpoint, the superintendent and board say, okay, we're going to...and you got the rank and file saying, here we go again. They're not there.

Staff development. The role of staff development will additionally need to change to support teachers and administrators in their modified roles.

The staff development that has to occur is a different type ...We have not put our moneys into that kind of thing. We've put them into special programs and it's a little spot here, and a spot there. But nothing gets a chance to really permeate, try to stir it up long enough to see will it work.

Increases in staff development resources would be necessary to support the magnitudes of changes being discussed.

...we have to spend a lot more energy and effort in staff development for teachers, for principals. Learning should be thought of as a lifetime enterprise and that if we're in the education business, then we ought to exemplify that by our own continual learning.

...if you're going to put us into a business model, then allow us to have access to the kind of equipment, technology, personnel, and so forth that they have.

Involvement of other child care providers. The relationship of schools with other child care providers must grow. As one participant wistfully noted, "schools should not be an isolated institution." If they are to meet all the needs of children, personnel from individual school buildings will have to reach out to other community agencies who serve children. They will have to connect and forge new partnerships to protect and promote the well-being of students. As participants commented,

I'm not sure that interconnection exists in such a strong way. That is, the connection between home and school and the other community agencies. We've got a fracturing that's a problem.

We got to make the table bigger. We've got to bring to the table representatives from social services who are trained specifically to interact with educators and work with school-aged children. We've got to bring representatives from health, human services who are trained specifically to interact with families and children incorporated in the school system.

Given the enormous needs of many children, focus group participants stressed that schools can no longer handle the problem alone.

Role of parents and the community at large. The role of parents in schools is a black box. As one participant noted,

I think we often give lip service to the fact that we want parents involved. We do, we want them there at the PTA meetings and we want them there baking cookies, but we really don't want them sitting down and making a lot of demands because that is a pain in the neck. And who has time for that. It's difficult enough, if you're the principal and you have five or six parents who make huge demands on your time, if you've got 500 of them in elementary school, the teachers and the principal are really going to have to produce and that's going to be a whole different scene. So I wonder sometimes how much we really want them involved.

In spite of this confusion over how parents should be involved in schools and their child's education, focus group participants felt that

...parents need to be educated, to evolve this process of where everybody is focused on helping the child learn.

They felt this was especially the case for "parents of the kids who are not involved" or engaged in school now.

The role of the community also was addressed. Here again, focus group participants talked about the lack of connections.

...causing people to feel very unstable and looking for something. I don't think we're giving that to them. It's not being given in their homes. It's not being given in the schools. I don't even think it's being given in the churches in a lot of cases. They're just losing that piece of stability that they need to put their life together, to get their perspectives in line with what they want to do or what they want to train themselves for.

Participants called for more connections between children and the communities in which they live. To develop these connections, focus group participants talked about the need to broaden educators' concept of the

classroom, to expand the learning environment into the community. Connections between what students learn in school and the real world have to be made.

Role of state and federal education authorities. Participants generally agreed that state and federal government regulations do little to help solve the problems facing public education.

I think, in fact, the state has lots of regulations that hold schools back and school systems back.

They were divided on how much to worry about or counter state or federal actions.

...and until we can influence policy at the state and federal level, I don't think really the hard questions can be dealt with.

I don't really worry a whole heck of a lot what changes at the national level, where we're suppose to be going, because they don't have the horses to monitor. The same thing with our state board president...I figure once we've got a plan in place, I can get slapped on the wrist several times and it's not going to bother a whole heck of a lot. They just don't have the police power to stop us from what we're doing.

In either case, changes are needed to reduce the negative effects and if possible, increase the positive effects of state and federal actions.

Types of Assistance

The final part of the focus group discussion centered on the assistance organizations like RBS should provide to school districts undertaking restructuring. This question proved difficult for focus group participants to answer, primarily because of their lack of exposure and experience with R&D organizations. Their responses were limited in number and emphasized four types of assistance.

Promote Communication Among Educators About Schooling

Half of the focus group participants' responses suggested that RBS should promote opportunities for communication about schooling and provide content to stimulate those discussions. In terms of the former, participants stressed how difficult it was for educators to find time to talk with their colleagues. For example, several noted that the focus group experience itself was such an opportunity.

This was just a lot of fun. Talking to different people from different places with different perspectives. One of the things we don't do in schools a lot...is have some intellectual dialogue or debates about what we're doing. It might be useful to get groups of people together.

I like the opportunity, and I wish that teachers could have

more of the opportunities to do what we're doing today. You know, to talk with other people, not just in their own district, but from all over.

Communicating to educators about the findings of educational R&D was very important to our focus group participants.

And nor are the practitioners reading the research. Most schools have professional literature tables, or they have a cabinet that has all the professional literature, but you don't see much evidence that they really have any dialogue around the table with it.

I think one of your steps in the right direction in my view, is the move that you made a couple of years ago to putting more stuff in print that's accessible to people...So to make your stuff more accessible to people is an extremely valuable step that you've made.

Teachers and principals alike need to do a lot of collaborating around their learning and if you had things of this type that would quickly point out areas of study, that would help.

Provide Technical Assistance

Focus group participants recommended that RBS play the role of technical assistor, helping schools design, plan, carry out, and evaluate initiatives in their schools. As two participants noted,

It seems to me that one of the things that schools need are some critics who are friendly...it seems to me if you could, if I'm willing to take some steps along the change journey, if I had you there to hold my hand, there's a number of things you could help us do...help us figure out what to keep track of and what not and we could do some research while we're running our schools.

...look at data based implementation and give short increments back to teachers on their performance, degree of implementation and then a lot of them use that to refine and monitor and adjust what they're doing. That could be the contribution in a restructuring plan...to take slices throughout time so that people could monitor and adjust.

Conduct Research to Identify Exemplary Practices

Focus group participants recognized the importance of laboratories conducting research on school restructuring and other school-based efforts.

...maybe create five, six scenarios, case studies of where some of these things are being implemented and are successful and can be shared with other districts.

Try to identify some school systems where new paradigms are actually functioning successfully, effectively over a period of time and share those with schools that are wanting to change.

Assist in Grant Writing

Not surprisingly, focus group participants suggested that RBS should help educators obtain funding for special projects in their districts. For some, this was the bottom line.

I personally feel that you can come to our district and consult with whomever, but unless you can provide us with the money to get it done, forget about it. That's a waste of time ...I've seen different things come down the pike, and if the money is not there to back it up, how's it going to stay? So I guess I would like to see you...come up with a list of funding sources as well and then spend some time with districts.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The discussions of the five FY 91 focus groups revealed several conclusions concerning school restructuring in the Mid-Atlantic region. First, school restructuring continues to be an important regional issue. Educators realize that school restructuring is different from school improvement, that it involves major reforms, and is undertaken to produce a different order of outcomes for students.

Second, there is consensus among Mid-Atlantic educators that a different order of student outcomes is needed. Foremost among these is that all students learn and are successful in school. Other outcomes identified by the focus group participants emphasized process skills, for example, working together cooperatively, problem solving, learning how to learn. However, these outcomes will have to be defined in more detail if appropriate school programs are to be designed and implemented. For example, what does it mean to have a school curriculum that teaches students how to become independent learners? Educators will need help in thinking through and developing these student outcomes. They will need help in carrying out this identification and design process as well as conceptualizing the specific outcomes in more detail. These are roles RBS can play.

Third, educators in our focus groups were able to sketch changes needed in classroom and school scenarios in broad strokes. They called for classrooms that individualize instruction, group students and teachers in different ways, revamp the school curriculum to emphasize process skills, and break down the barriers between schools and the larger community. These sketches will need much more detail if they are to become a reality. RBS can help educators add detail to these sketches. In addition, RBS can facilitate this process by documenting, evaluating, and disseminating these scenarios to other educators throughout the region.

Fourth, school restructuring requires time, and lots of it. If school improvement initiatives required sizable chunks of time to accomplish, school restructuring requires even more time. In particular, the up-front investment will be especially time consuming because of the need to create that shared vision, to reach consensus on student outcomes before being able to make meaningful and lasting changes in school programs.

The focus groups identified restructuring issues and roles that RBS should address in its work in the region in the coming four years. These are not unfamiliar issues and roles to the Mid-Atlantic regional laboratory. However, input from the five focus groups will help to fine tune the laboratory's work during year two so that it can be more in sync with school restructuring issues in the region.

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